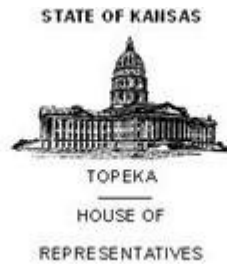


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Newsletter – May 2010 – A Report on the Kansas Legislative Session and Other Activities

Friends: This is my third Newsletter of the 2010 Session and, as before, I will discuss issues before the Legislature and our state that may not be reported in the news. As always, my legislative focus is on meeting our current needs and positioning the state to address long-term opportunities and to prevent future crises.

State Budget Negotiations: The budget/revenue decisions probably will not have been completed by the time you receive this newsletter, but I want you to have a sense of what is happening. In my previous two newsletters, information was provided regarding additional budget reduction options and revenue enhancement options. A Wichita-based policy advisory group has suggested some further budget reduction options (based on legislative discussions) that include selling state assets, “shutting down” state government at 3:00 p.m. every Friday, freezing state employee pay, not repaying money “borrowed” from the Department of Transportation, requiring school districts to spend their capital reserve funds for operational needs, letting local school districts raise property tax rates to replace federal ARRA (stimulus) money instead of the state replacing those funds, and more. As always, the need is to balance desired program requirements and the impact of taxes/fees on individuals and the state’s economy. Possible revenue enhancements include increasing the state sales tax as Governor Parkinson recommends, increasing tobacco, alcohol, and other “sin” taxes, adding a third income tax bracket and rate, and repealing some existing tax exemptions.

I participated in a ceremonial bill signing (HB 2445 – to help protect military facilities from civilian encroachments that adversely affect the long term viability of the \$8 billion per year contributed to the Kansas economy by military base operations) with Governor Parkinson. Following the ceremony, we briefly discussed our collaborative efforts to develop a responsible budget with adequate funding. As I pointed out to the Governor, while he must be concerned about preparing a budget for fiscal year 2011 that begins on July 1, 2010, he will leave office in January 2011. I must be concerned about developing a multi-year budget and funding stream that carry the state through the existing recession and recovery. Too often a majority of legislators look only at one year’s conditions and needs without examining the impact decisions “today” will have on the next year’s programs and budgets (services to the citizens of Kansas).

Almost every day during our three week legislative recess, I talked in person, by telephone, and via e-mail with colleagues and the Administration about how revenues are changing (individual income tax, sales tax, corporate income tax, motor fuel, inheritance, excise and every other tax revenue– up or down) and what the impact of the \$1 billion state budget reductions in the past 18 months have on services to citizens. Identifying the mix of expenditures and revenue enhancements that meet our citizens’ needs and can secure the necessary legislative votes is a very challenging task and involves developing an extensive coalition of legislators with divergent perspectives.

An example of issue complexity is the recommendation that small rural western Kansas schools be consolidated. On the surface, from eastern Kansas, this makes financial sense. However, as we recently learned in Lawrence when closing some neighborhood schools was suggested as a cost-savings means, local schools matter to people – from education, community, economic, social, and security perspectives. My work to expand the use of distance education technologies and applications is one means to reduce costs associated with maintaining smaller schools/districts. It is neither a perfect nor complete answer, but it reflects my commitment to balancing responsible state budgets with social awareness and responsiveness.

Now that the Legislature has reconvened, my days are spent in face-to-face discussions with my colleagues seeking to secure the necessary votes to pass a responsible package of funding and taxing measures. As I have previously stated, we have an obligation to assist those persons less fortunate than we are, provide for educational opportunities and public safety, and provide the services and service that Kansans deserve.

TeleHealth Collaboration: Previous newsletters have included information about my work to expand the use of Internet technologies to improve health care delivery in Kansas. Technological advances permit health care providers and patients to “see” each other over long distances electronically, exchange test results, and monitor chronic health conditions very cost-effectively.

Last Fall, I contacted the Secretary of the U.S. Veterans Administration about developing a partnership between the VA and Kansas health care providers. The VA has a very successful telemedicine program linking their hospitals; I suggested that Kansas veterans should be able to visit their local hospital and be “electronically seen” by physicians at VA hospitals. This would save drive time for veterans, strengthen local hospitals and the connectivity between health care institutions, and save money for all parties.

The Secretary of the Veterans Administration responded that such collaboration should be explored. The Chief Medical Officer of the VA’s Heartland Network in Kansas City contacted me stating, “This area is not only important for the Veterans we serve in the VA Heartland Network, but for many American citizens.” A group of Kansas and VA healthcare leaders met with me and established a working committee of technical professionals to determine how best to proceed. I am optimistic about and pleased with the VA’s interest in a collaborative effort to improve health care for veterans and non-veterans. The telemedicine faculty at the KU Medical Center/Hospital is coordinating the technical discussions on behalf of Kansas stakeholders.

What Did Tom Do During the April Legislative Break: The Kansas Legislature is considered a “part-time” job because we officially meet for approximately 90 days per year. Constituent requests for assistance with state agencies and providing information about what state programs should be saved occur daily. I spend at least one hour per day reading and responding to constituent letters/telephone calls/e-mails.

I also seek opportunities to expand my knowledge. Recently, I spent a day attending a Kansas Corporation Commission sponsored Electricity Rate Design Alternatives Workshop. This was a non-paid day to learn about how increasing consumer requests for renewable energy, energy conservation, more efficient utility operations, lower utility plant emissions, and more can impact revenue needs by electric utilities and how those costs should be reflected in rates for residential, commercial, and industrial customers. While I do not make decisions in utility rate case filings, my work on energy and utility issues provides me an opportunity to provide guidance to the Commissioners and utilities.

I continually seek opportunities to advance Kansas’ interests with federal policy-makers. As you know from previous newsletters, I am vitally interested in the health and adequacy of our water supply system. At a recent meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures’ (NCSL) Environment Committee, I successfully advanced several resolutions calling for increased collaboration by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (water supply) and the Environmental Protection Agency (water quality) with state water agencies; and for the Department of Energy to study the impact of increased energy production (e.g., bio-fuels, natural gas recovery from shale) on long term water supply availability. These resolutions, when adopted by the NCSL, will guide interactions between NCSL, states, and the federal agencies. Kansas has great potential for increased energy production, but we also must be very aware of the impact on our long-term water supplies from the Ogallala Aquifer and Republican/Kansas River from activities in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and North and South Dakota. Incidentally, the April 2010 *National Geographic, A Special Issue, Water, Our Thirsty World*, features a two page spread on groundwater in Kansas (pages 130-131).

Teleconferences permit me to participate in many meetings that can benefit our community and state. I participated in a call by the GridWise Architecture Council, of which I am a member, about interoperability issues associated with “Smart Grid.” Westar Energy is planning to install “smart” meters for their Lawrence customers. The Council works to establish the criteria so that vendors sell equipment that is interchangeable and operates on all systems. This is important because if Westar installs a system that cannot be updated without replacing all meters, then customer costs will be higher. A simple analogy is the standardization of flash drive technologies. All flash drives are interoperable – they will work with any computer – thus there are no “Dell-only” flash drives.

Monitoring newsletters, web sites, etc., on topics important to our community takes at least another hour or more per day. For example, I am a former Commissioner from Kansas to the Midwest Higher Education Compact (MHEC) and regularly follow their discussions. I also have filed comments with the Federal Communications

Commission regarding rural broadband availability, access to telemedicine services, and other issues that impact our state.

I also have been involved in conversations with staff from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy, EPA, Council of State Governments, plus many state agencies (e.g., Water Office, Department of Revenue, Health Policy Authority). I truly enjoy serving the long-term best interests of our community and state, but it is a full-time job made possible only because of the support of my wife, Gail.

Possible National Appointments: As you may recall, I serve on the U.S. Department of Energy's Electricity Advisory Committee as the only representative of all state legislators in the country. My appointment was for one year, but my reappointment documents are on the Secretary's desk. This is important to Lawrence/Douglas County residents because federal leaders receive a Kansas perspective on issues important to us (e.g., wind energy, transmission lines to "move" the energy), rather than one from New York State, California, or North Dakota.

The Council of State Governments, a national organization including representatives from the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of state governments, and on which I serve as the Vice Chairman of the Environment Task Force, nominated me for a position on a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Advisory Council. Again, this is important to Lawrence/Douglas County residents because it will be another opportunity for Kansas' common sense perspectives on water and air quality policies to be heard.

It is possible that I will receive neither appointment, Kansas is not a very important state politically, but I hope to have the opportunity to represent our interests and perspectives on these national committees.

Vision 2020 Committee: While most committees address relatively small aspects of an issue by holding hearings on a specific bill, the Vision 2020 Committee holds hearings on broad, substantive matters and seeks to bring the many stakeholders together to identify paths forward. As you may recall, the Speaker of the House accepted my suggestion that a long-range committee is needed to examine issues that must be addressed when the state's economy improves. The Speaker subsequently named me Chairman of the Committee.

In 2009 we held extensive hearings on the current and future health of our state's water supply lakes and reservoirs (e.g., Clinton Lake). Over the next 8 months, Kansas' water agencies developed a "Reservoir Roadmap" that will serve as a multi-year guide to extending the productive lives of our surface water system. Similarly, we held hearings on the state's economic development agencies and policies. As a result of those hearings and our directives, KS Inc. commissioned a study of alternative economic development models that focuses on helping each business expand, rather than largely focusing on attracting large out-of-state businesses to re-locate to Kansas. Our Committee is now encouraging economic development agencies and interests to examine how the two perspectives may best be combined to better serve our state's long term interests. Finally, in 2009 we examined telemedicine/telehealth monitoring. I discussed above the conversations between the Veterans Administration and KU Medical Center's telemedicine administrators about linking the two systems and, in addition, health insurance providers in Kansas are responding to a survey about which telemedicine services they cover.

This session we concentrated on higher education issues, including distance education opportunities, the role of vocational-technical colleges, and student retention/success issues. Again, we are encouraging the Board of Regents, individual institutions, and other interested parties to spend the next 8 months looking at what assistance the Legislature can provide in developing "roadmaps" for institutions to become more effective educational centers over the next decade.

Closing Comments: Please contact me if you have questions about any state issues, wish to spend a day with me at the Capitol next year, or have an idea on how State government can better serve the long-term best interests of our community and state. If you are receiving a printed copy of this Newsletter and would prefer to receive it electronically, please contact my assistant at mary.koles@house.ks.gov or me at tom.sloan@house.ks.gov. Please share this Newsletter with your family and friends and encourage them to contact me also whenever they have information that will better enable me to represent our citizens.

I will again develop the annual Legislative Report that summarizes the more important pieces of legislation that are passed this year. It will be distributed through the Lawrence Journal World and appear on my web site www.tomsloan2008.com. Both these Newsletters and the Legislative Report reflect my belief that voters should

know what their elected officials are doing and be able to participate in the process. Your ideas and perspectives are important to me.

*Ben Wicks,
Vom*